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For information on other water resource protection issues, such as wetlands, wastewater and stormwater, call the BRP Hotline at 1.800.266.1122.



Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Argeo Paul Cellucci, Governor

Executive Office of Environmental Affairs
Bob Durand, Secretary

Department of Environmental Protection
Lauren A. Liss, Commissioner

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Responding to Consumers:

Tips for Community Public Water Suppliers



Some Basic Points

Honesty

There are times when it may seem better not to supply all the facts in response to an inquiry. This only causes more problems. Not only will consumers still have questions; you may lose their trust on other information you provide.

Clarity

Provide information in plain, straightforward language. Avoid technical terms and jargon. When you have to describe something technical, use plain language and everyday analogies.

Facts

When answering questions, stick to the facts you know. When you do not know, do not guess. Simply say you do not know and will find the answer to the question or refer the person to a source who can help. Guessing, and then being wrong, undermines credibility and trust.

Respect

The ability to listen effectively is very important to successful communication. Acknowledge consumers concerns and sincerely answer their questions. If you appear to lack interest or sincerity, you can destroy the trust you are working to build.

Timeliness

Respond as quickly as possible to questions and concerns. If you do not know the answer, let people know that you are working to find it and will stay in contact until you do.

Communicating Risk

Risks, hazards, and times of crisis will require you to communicate with your consumers, and that may be difficult. Consumers may be concerned or upset about a situation even if you know, from a technical standpoint, that the risk or hazard is not serious. There will also be times when a problem *is* serious. In any case, effective communication is vital to keep consumers informed and address their concerns.

Planning

You know problems may arise in your system. Plan ahead. Set up procedures to assess each problem's extent, source and possible solutions. Identify the audiences with whom you will need to communicate. Determine who will communicate your information and how. Identify those with whom you will need to work on finding a solution. Create systems and procedures for keeping consumers informed, such as a hotline for people to call for information, or a Web site for posting updates.

Involvement

As risks and crises develop, inform and involve the public from the start to maintain your credibility. Although you may feel the urge to focus on the problem at hand, it is important to keep the public updated on what is happening. Listen to people's concerns and communicate the facts using everyday language. This will help build consumer trust that risks are being addressed.

Getting Help

There may be times when a crisis or risk to public health requires you to seek assistance. Work with credible sources to identify and

address risks, problems and solutions, including bylaws and regulations to protect water supplies. For instance, the Department of Environmental Protection, the Department of Public Health, local public health and elected officials, and independent testing and health experts all have an interest in water quality and safety. By coordinating with these parties, you will address your situation effectively and lend credibility to your efforts.



Working with the Media

Proactive outreach to the media is important. Providing general information and “good” news on a regular basis will help you build trust and relationships with members of the media. Invite reporters who cover the environment to your awareness days or open houses, especially during Drinking Water Week in May. Let them know about any awards that you may receive.

Some situations will attract negative attention. Bad news does not improve with age, so work with reporters to answer their questions. Provide the facts and respond in a timely way to inquiries. Doing so will help you maintain trust and credibility with consumers. Not doing so may result in the media going elsewhere to get answers, leaving you with no input or control over what is being said. Do not be afraid to say that something was a problem, but that it was corrected.

These tips will help you create a productive relationship with your community. But, as with any other subject, the more you know, the better off you will be. Programs such as those offered by the American Water Works Association on risk communication will help.

For More Information

Refer to *Consumer Confidence Report, Communication Plan, DEP, July 1999*, to use in communicating with your customers. If you do not have this document, it will be available on the DEP website: www.state.ma.us/dep



Contact the national Safe Drinking Water Hotline at 800.426.4791 for drinking water publications and fact sheets on health effects of contaminants.



Visit the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s website for drinking water information and links to other environmental sites: www.epa.gov/ogwdw



Attend workshops on communicating with your public sponsored by the New England Water Works Association. Contact them at 508.478.6996 or visit their website: www.newwa.org



Contact the American Water Works Association for publications and training on risk communication. Visit their website at: www.awwa.org



Refer to *Preparing Consumer Confidence Reports, A Guide to Massachusetts Requirements for Community Drinking Water Systems*, DEP, May 1999. Contact the DEP, Drinking Water Program at 617.292.5770 if you did not get a copy. You may also find this document on the DEP website.

Contaminant Levels...Testing Frequency... Treatment Procedures...Federal/State Guidelines

Consumer Confidence Reporting requires that you communicate information to your customers. To the people who drink the water you supply, information can be full of hard-to-pronounce terms, confusing numbers and dense regulatory language. This may unnecessarily increase consumer concerns about drinking water.

Communicating with the citizens of your community and responding to their concerns are important responsibilities. You need to answer consumer questions and communicate risk in clear language that establishes trust. This guide provides tips on communicating with the people that you serve.

The citizens of your community are not only consumers of your drinking water; they can also become your allies in efforts to protect your sources of supply. Consumer Confidence Reports are likely to make people more interested in your activities. This may pose challenges, but it also offers you opportunities to build more productive relationships with consumers. By listening carefully and communicating clearly, you will go a long way toward creating a relationship with them that is based on trust, and this will help you as you work to provide safe and reliable drinking water.